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Threats to Academic Freedom

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Threats to Academic Freedom

Submitted by: Michael Moore

4/10/2009

Question:

Recently, threats were made that caused Georgia Southern University to cancel a national speaker on the grounds of “security concerns” and the estimated cost of providing security: Are all threats treated equally? Or are threats analyzed and assessed re: their validity or seriousness? Are there categories of threats? Do we have established, written protocols that we follow when threats are made, on the basis of which decisions such as canceling a campus event are made? If not a protocol, are there procedures of any kind generally followed? Whose decision is it to cancel a campus event, and at what “threat level” is that decision considered valid?

Since we had a cancellation of an event recently, a presentation by Bill Ayers, has any effort been made to assess the validity of that cancellation? Was there any effort made to identify and apprehend those who made the threats? Is an investigation concluded or ongoing?

Rationale:

At this time I am not asking about threats to individual faculty or staff, but rather, threats that would lead to canceling an open, campus event. I understand that these involve issues of safety and security, but how do we keep anyone from being a target, whether Bill Ayers or Rush Limbaugh? This issue is one of academic freedom, as noted in a recent article by AAUP President Cary Nelson who concluded his essay with, “We either must stand firm against these efforts to undermine the integrity of our educational institutions or agree that academic freedom no longer obtains in America.

Response:

7/8/2009: The following response is to the RFI dated April 10, 2009, Threats to Academic Freedom.

Ken Brown, former Director of the Office of Public Safety responded to the RFI. The Chief routinely meets with GISAC (Georgia Information Sharing and Analysis Center), with the GBI Special Agent and with the Augusta Bureau FBI agent. If there is a perceived threat as in the visit of a controversial figure, local police groups must decide on the numbers and costs needed to protect the speaker. This information is passed along to school authorities. Threat assessment is the same no matter whom the speaker or even is.

Complicating the situation is ever increasing budget cuts that force law enforcement agencies to rely more on electronic intelligence as opposed to ground intelligence, which is more costly, yet, more effective. Those who make threats via email or Facebook can easily obtain encryption devices that make it difficult to determine where the threat is coming from. This makes it difficult to apprehend those who made the threats.

The decision to cancel Bill Ayers did not come from Public Safety. Their office provided the assessment and potential cost.

6/3/2009: Moore reported that the SEC had not received a response to an RFI on how Georgia Southern assesses perceived threats to academic freedom and makes decisions based on such assessment.

Minutes, 6/23/2009: Mike Moore's query about how GSU assesses threats and makes decisions based on such assessment. Because the issue is not particularly time-sensitive, President Grube will respond to that RFI when time allows.

Links: February 16, 2009:

<https://inside.georgiasouthern.edu/President/facultysenate/Archives/Minutes/2009/February%20Addendum.pdf>

2009 Minutes:

<https://inside.georgiasouthern.edu/President/facultysenate/Archives/Minutes/2009/2009%20combined%20minutes.pdf>